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Ahwatukee group opens battle over freeway

By J. Craig Anderson
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Opponents of a planned freeway in Ahwatukee Foothills urged hundreds of residents to give time and money to their cause Saturday. The grass-roots organization Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children used its first public meeting to recruit volunteers and collect donations for an anticipated lawsuit to stop the South Mountain Freeway leg of Loop 202 from passing along the community's southern edge.

"It's not a spectator sport," the group's founder and president Melanie Pai told a packed audience at the Pecos Community Center. "We'll need the support of the community to effect change."

Pai asked attendees to donate \$100 each or \$250 per family to pay for the group's lawyer, environmental experts and other costs associated with fighting the freeway's proposed alignment.

She pointed to a University of Southern California study released last week that found children growing up near busy highways suffered from respiratory problems later in life as a result of impaired lung development.

"As the mother of an asthmatic child ... this is a serious matter," Pai said.

She added the proposed freeway is being touted by transportation officials as a bypass around downtown Phoenix for international trucking, which means Mexican trucks could be spewing unregulated diesel emissions near homes and schools.

Steve Brittle, an environmentalist and adviser to the group, said a truck bypass also would put the community at risk to a hazardous chemical spill. He pointed to a study of chlorine tanker spills that found wide-ranging and longlasting environmental effects.

"The idea here is not to make the community a sitting duck," Brittle said.

The alignment was selected in 1988 as part of a long-term transportation plan for the Valley, Arizona Department of Transportation officials have said.

At that time, there were no homes or schools nearby. Now, about 220 homes would have to be condemned to make room for the initial six-lane freeway and a future expansion to 10 lanes, ADOT says.

Some residents at the meeting said they weren't told about the freeway plans when they purchased their homes, and one asked the group's attorney, Howard Shanker, if residents could file a class-action lawsuit against area developers.

Shanker said he didn't want to talk about the feasibility of such a lawsuit because the group is hoping for

developers' support. He said if the group is successful, a lawsuit against homebuilders would not be necessary.

The group's best chance to stop the freeway is by challenging it on environmental grounds in federal court, Shanker said.

That can't happen until ADOT completes an environmental impact study and submits it to the public for review, he said, adding that successful environmental lawsuits are often won on appeal and can take years.

Shanker said weathering that storm will require unity among residents even if they oppose the freeway project for different reasons - and money.

ADOT officials have said they will release a draft of the environmental report this summer, followed by meetings and a public comment period of at least 45 days.

Shanker said the group intends to hire its own environmental experts to scrutinize the report, but was skeptical as to whether ADOT would give them serious consideration.

Some local officials and their representatives attended the meeting, including Sen. John Huppenthal, R-Chandler, whose district includes Ahwatukee Foothills. He pledged his support to the group.



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